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The Bookshelf

JFK, Aides, Policies Dot Diplomacy Survey

The two most popular books on John F. Kennedy and his Administration, by Arthur Schlesinger and Theodore Sorenson, have stopped just this side of idolatry. Now in "To Move a Nation," Roger Hillsman, formerly of the State Department and currently in academic work, furnishes a diplomatic history of the Kennedy years that casts the President as something of a heroic leader. Obviously, Mr. Kennedy has been generally favored so far in the image being projected to posterity.

Mr. Hillsman, a West Point graduate, served in the China-India-Burma theater during World War II. Following the war, he alternated between academic assignments and work for the CIA, the State Department and other Government agencies. He is obviously a man of strong convictions and vigorous personality. And on some issues—the policy that led to the overthrow and murder of South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem and the decision to abstain from diplomatic relations with Communist China and to oppose its admission to the UN—he adopts debatable positions.

The book casts a sharp eye on the personal traits and characteristics of the men Mr. Hillsman met in Washington. He found Secretary of State Rusk reserved and shy, but with a quiet sense of humor. The Secretary's relations with the press were always correct, but never good. The author offers a plausible explanation:

"Newsmen need sharp, clear-cut statements of administrative thinking and policy, highlighting change in particular, and Rusk's instinct was the exact opposite. His natural tendency was to mask his thinking and to smooth over change particularly, and he had a great skill with the diplomatist's technique of using words that obscure rather than reveal."

Secretary of Defense McNamara impressed the author as extraordinarily able, brilliantly efficient, but not wise. Mr. Hillsman gives him credit for vastly increasing the effectiveness of the military establishment, for being "superb in his field," but faults him on a tendency to roam beyond this field.

McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's main trouble-shooter, was, in Mr. Hillsman's view, perhaps as able a man as any in Washington at the time. He recognizes Mr. Bundy's air of impatience and brusque, no-nonsense manner as lending to the charge of arrogance against a man with an eminently patrician New England background. But he recalls an occasion when Mr. Bundy thoughtfully administered some salve after Mr. Hillsman had been the object of a Kennedy "tongue-lashing that made the wires sizzle." This convinced him Mr. Bundy probably had more thoughtfulness, more warmth for other people than either of the two Secretaries.

President Kennedy is portrayed as having been quick in mind and sophisticated, vastly charming with a sprightly, earthy even impish Irish wit. Kennedy's greatest, "almost magical," quality is seen by Mr. Hillsman as the ability to infuse into other men his zeal to get America, and the world, moving in what he saw as the right direction, an objective he accomplished without sentimentality and without letting either the excitement or the idealism cloy. Sometimes there was the accompaniment of self-mockery, as when he composed a parody of his own inaugural address.

This far-ranging book, along with delineating methods of policy planning and making, discusses America's relations with China, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Congo, and its handling of the Cuban missile crisis. Commenting on the U. S. intelligence record in Cuba, the author notes that although the missiles were discovered in time to prevent irreparable damage, surveillance could be criticized for relying too much on the U-2 and too little on the "tedious, but still essential methods of classical espionage."

Although Mr. Hillsman is generally fair to those who disagreed with him, he appears to strike a low blow in designating with the stale pejorative "The China Lobby" any opponents of Red China's recognition or admission to the United Nations. There isn't much evidence for the view, with which the author is apparently in sympathy, that a more "flexible" policy toward mainland China would have yielded more positive results. When one reads of the recent outrageous insults and mob violence to which diplomats of Britain, France, India, the Soviet Union and other countries have been subjected by the youthful Red Guards it should be a source of satisfaction that there are no U.S. representatives in China to be subjected to similar treatment. When the Red Chinese show themselves capable of carrying on civilized negotiations it will be time to take this possibility into account. But that time is clearly not yet.

Predictions that don't come off are usually omitted from books published after the event. A curious exception is Mr. Hillsman's reference to the question of seating Communist China in the UN Assembly:

"So far there had also been a majority against unseating the Chinese Nationalists, but it would not last long. There was simply no possibility of avoiding a debate on the question in 1961, and if a majority to seat Communist China and expel the Nationalists did not develop this year, it would in the next."

It is now 1967. The author, like other prophets of the "inevitability" of accepting Red China as a member of the UN, seems to have underestimated Mao Tse-tung's remarkable capacity for losing friends and alienating people.

Mr. Hillsman, who resigned shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy, was deeply involved in decision-making on Vietnam. He had a large hand in the framing of a very important cable to Ambassador Lodge in Vietnam on Aug. 24, 1963, prescribing that, if Ngo Dinh Diem didn't make certain reforms,

the Vietnam generals should be told that "the United States would have to face the possibility that the regime could not be preserved." This was a green light for the coup that led to Diem's destruction some weeks later.

Despite a tendency to excessive detail and occasional repetition that makes "To Move a Nation" overly long, the book, with its lucid and vivid writing style, offers a storehouse of information that no student of Kennedy Administration foreign policy can afford to overlook.

—WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

To Move a Nation. By Roger Hillsman. Doubleday, 602 pages. \$6.95.